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Tuesday, April 22, 2003



Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News

Nancy Holan said she was surprised to learn that she and her neighbors are responsible for paying for road repairs in her Waterford Township subdivision.

Street repairs sock township homeowners

Repaving crumbling roads can cost \$7,000 per household

By Jennifer Chambers / The Detroit News

WATERFORD

TOWNSHIP -- After four decades in the same home, Nancy Holan's to-do list included the usual suspects: replacing roofs, refrigerators, worn-out rugs.

But it came as a surprise to Holan that her responsibility for around-the-house repairs literally extended to the roads winding through her Waterford Township subdivision. While heading a drive to get five local roads resurfaced, Holan learned that she and her neighbors -- not the township, county or state -- would be footing the bill.



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Max Lare of Plymouth Township's Green Meadows subdivision paid about \$2,700 as his share of the cost to have the street paved.

Paving project requirements

In order for a road in Oakland County to be considered for a special assessment

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"When I started on this project, I was under the impression the county would pay for it," Holan said.

Thousands of homeowners in 1960s and 1970s subdivisions across Metro Detroit are now learning they will face individual tabs of up to \$7,000 apiece to repave crumbling suburban streets in front of their homes.

The untold cost of repaving subdivision roads has come to light in recent years as streets installed by developers 30 to 40 years ago have fallen into disrepair beyond the point of continuous patch and pothole fixes.

Unlike city and village homeowners, whose street repairs are financed with property taxes, general-fund money or road millages, residents who live in townships in Oakland and Wayne counties are solely responsible for paying for improvements of local roads.

Townships have no jurisdictional responsibility for roads, according to state law, although a bill is pending that could change that.

If homeowners want work done, they must tax themselves for repaving projects that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some homeowners in townships say they were not told that before moving to the community.

In Oakland County, township taxpayers have voluntarily shelled out more than \$70 million since 1969 to fix 463 miles of neighborhood roads.

"That's a pretty significant amount of money where citizens have taxed themselves," said Dennis Acre, head of the Road Commission for Oakland County's special assessment District Paving Program. "The benefit to the people and the property is significant."

district paving project, it must meet the following requirements:

- It must be a public road.
- It must be outside city or village limits.
- At least 75 percent of the property along the road must be subdivided into parcels of 300 feet or less in width, or there can be no fewer than one building for every 300 feet of road frontage.
- Owners of properties representing more than 51 percent of the road's footage must support the project.

Source: Road Commission for Oakland County

What's at issue

- Unlike cities and villages, townships require residents themselves to pay for road projects on local subdivision roads.
- A majority of residents can approve a special assessment district, which would allow the township to collect money — typically \$2,000 to \$7,000 per household — to repave roads in their neighborhood.
- A bill before the Michigan Legislature would allow township boards to assume jurisdiction of their roads and get money from the state to set up local road departments. Yet some townships say they aren't willing or able to take on that burden.

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Fixing township roads

In Michigan, townships have no jurisdictional responsibility for road work. If township residents want repaving done, they must tax themselves to pay for it. Should there be a state law giving townships the same jurisdiction cities and villages have over road maintenance?

☐ Yes

☐ No

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Crumbling roads

The Road Commission for Oakland County, which runs the largest county road system in the state, is already responsible for 2,600 miles of roads. The system grows another 20 to 30 miles a year because of new subdivisions.

After decades of wear and tear from motorists, garbage trucks and school buses, the roads finally wear out and crumble, leaving township residents with two choices: watch the roads worsen or band together and ask the the county road commission or township for a special assessment district, a designated area where a majority of property owners agree to be taxed in exchange for a specific service, such as paving roads.

Obtaining a special assessment district can be a contentious, lengthy process. Neighborhood meetings must be held, petitions must be circulated and signed and more than 51 percent of neighbors along both sides of a road must approve the levy, which can be paid back over a 10-year period.

The process took two years and went fairly well in Holan's Waterford neighborhood of Lake Angelus Golf View Estates, where 80 percent to 90 percent of residents supported the project. Each homeowner -- even those who do not support paying for repaving -- will pay about \$2,000 each for the work.

State bill

Not all homeowners believe road responsibility should be theirs. Many, like Bob Frick of West Bloomfield Township, weren't thinking about crumbling infrastructure when they bought their home 30 years ago.

"I think it's deplorable that we have to pay to repave our streets. As far as I'm concerned, they can continue to fall apart, because I can't see charging everybody five to ten thousand bucks to repave the streets after the county taxes we pay," Frick said. "I think it's an inappropriate shift in responsibility."

A bill before the Michigan Legislature could change the way roads are managed by Michigan townships.

Senate Bill 126 would give township boards the choice of assuming jurisdiction over roads, allowing them to dictate yearly maintenance and improvements. The Department of Transportation would then be required to pay the township the share of transportation funds formerly allocated to the county under this system.

Tom Frazier, legislative liaison for the Michigan Townships Association, said he expects townships such as Canton, Clinton and Waterford, which are already so large they practically operate as full municipalities, to take an interest in the proposal.

"The nice thing about this legislation is it gives the townships an opportunity to choose to do this if they want to do this. Not all townships are going to want to do this," Frazier said. "You can make the argument they should have this jurisdiction over the roads, since cities and villages already have that."

Millages denied

But Canton Township Supervisor Tom Yack said he has no interest in taking over roads in his community.

Twice in the past decade, the township asked residents to support a local road millage to pay for millions of dollars in needed repairs and to

plan for future needs. And twice they said no.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, would not give townships enough money to operate local road divisions, let alone pay for costly road repairs, Yack said.

"The roads, the infrastructure that is placed in front of your house, whether it's a water line, a sewer line or a storm water collection system or sidewalk or road -- what happens is the developer puts those all in at her or his expense and then passes the expense on to the buyer," Yack said. "So when it goes bad, it only makes sense that the people who live adjacent to the infrastructure themselves pay to improve it."

About \$2.5 billion in road funds is spent every year in Michigan, with 55 percent of that money going to state roads under jurisdiction of the Michigan Department of Transportation and 45 percent to local projects, said Gary Naeyaert of the Michigan Road Builders Association, which represents highway contractors.

State-raised road revenues are split this way: 39 percent to the state, 39 to the counties and nearly 22 percent to cities and villages.

Naeyaert supports reforming the way money is spent by allowing townships to get a part of the pie to manage their own roads.

"Townships don't own roads. They have no jurisdictional responsibility. That is a big burgeoning crisis here in Lansing," Naeyaert said. "The township begs at the feet of the county road commission, 'Please fix my roads.' The county will go to townships who will pay the most. Should it be based on need or your willingness to tax yourself?"

Assessment districts

Canton Township residents have yet to ask for a special assessment district for road repairs in local subdivisions that were built in 1970s. But that is expected to change in the next 10 to 15 years, township engineer Thomas Casari said.

"Our streets that are 30 years old are in pretty good shape. They aren't too broken up," Casari said. "We've been telling folks for a number of years, if they want their road replaced, it will be replaced at their expense. It's just like a roof. You need a new roof and you need new streets."

Neighboring Plymouth Township started its own special assessment district paving program six years ago after the Wayne County Road Commission decided it no longer wanted to get involved in such local road matters.

About 10 special-assessment district projects have been completed in the past five years in Plymouth, costing homeowners between \$3,000 and \$7,000 each to have roads repaved, said James D. Anulewicz, director of Plymouth's public services.

"I believe the (special assessment district) process is the most democratic process. It's not initiated from top down, it's initiated by local residents. You debate the pros and cons. You as neighbors have to come to some conclusion," Anulewicz said.

The bottom line is residents, not government, decide what is best for the neighborhood.

"We have to make a decision on whether we live with the roads the way they are or we take the bull by the horns and work with local government and have some control over the costs and the project," he said.